Samuel Gompers and the Establishment of American Federation of Labor Policies

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IT IS commonly believed that the policies of Samuel Gompers and the American Federation of Labor were always pretty much identical, and that the story of Gompers was largely the story of how he built the Federation.[1] Such a belief is quite natural, as the idea behind it has been cultivated by most of those who have written about Gompers. However, they have created this myth from two opposite approaches. On the one hand, Gompers himself, in his autobiography, indicates no fundamental divergence between himself and the other trade union leaders, except in some cases where they were described as less clear-visioned than he and he had to win them over to his version of "true trade unionism." But the general impression is conveyed that he created the A.F. of L. in his own image, worked out the philosophy behind it, and molded its policies in accordance with his principles. His biographer takes a similar point of view, diverging only to mention that Gompers' plans for organization often ran beyond the vision of those who thought only in terms of their own unions and the difficulties of raising money.[3]

On the other hand, there are those who minimize Gompers' influence except as an able and energetic organizer and administrator, and regard the consonance between him and the Federation not as the result of his leadership but as an expression of the identity of ideas and interests among trade unionists, of whom he was merely a representative. This appears to be the view of John R. Commons' associates, who are more concerned with movements and forces than personalities, and who never mention Gompers except as the spokesman for the Federation.[4] This attitude is shared by Norman J. Ware, who specifically states that Gompers' rise to leadership was a result of circumstances and objective forces of which he was merely an instrument.[5]

That the latter is the correct interpretation of Gompers' role after 1900 will not be gainsaid. But the fact has not been adequately noted that such was not the case during the first decade or so of the A.F. of L.'s history, when its policies were being established. In that period Gompers had some very basic differences with the majority of trade union officials, but there is not a single major instance where Gompers was able to persuade them to this point of view. In every important case, it was he who gave way, not they. Gompers was not, of course, totally lacking in independent influence. His position clothed him with authority to act for the Federation between conventions, and he often used this authority to further his policies. On other occasions he ignored

the constitution of the A.F. of L. and the specific instructions of conventions, or even defied them. For example, when the Federation convened a few days after the Henry George mayoralty campaign of New York City in 1886, it declared that the time had arrived for the working people to decide on united action at the ballot box and resolved to urge a most generous support to labor's independent political movement. But Gompers did not give "generous support," or any support at all, to the United Labor Party. Instead of carrying out the mandate of the Federation, he "stood back and watched" and "did not let the A.F. of L. become entagled in any partisan activity. . . ." The following year he disparaged the movement in a letter to the party's journal, and refused to say a word in behalf of George's campaign for governor of New York State, declaring that the questions involved did not affect labor's interests.[6]

But the extent to which he could act contrary to official Federation policy was obviously narrowly circumscribed. If Gompers could have had his way, the A.F. of L. would have been a far different organization than it was, and so would the history of the American labor movement and of our country. A few examples will indicate the direction that Gompers desired to give the labor movement in its formative years and why he failed to accomplish his purposes.

One instance of divergence between Gompers and other labor officials involved the question of closer cooperation between the trade unions. In his own organization, the Cigarmakers International Union, Gompers was a pioneer of industrial unionism. In 1869 the union began to decline, partly because of the introduction of the mold, a device for shaping cigars, which made superfluous the special skill of the cigarmakers and permitted the wholesale introduction of women and children into the industry. The International not only refused to admit rollers and bunch-breakers, i.e., the mold workers, but forbade its members to work in the same shop with them. It was at this point that Gompers entered the labor scene, and he rose to leadership on the issue of combatting the exclusive admission requirements of his union.

Gompers and Adolph Strasser, members of the nearly defunct New York local, organized a new union, the United Cigarmakers, and opened its doors to all workers who were excluded by the International. Gompers pointed out at a mass meeting that the purpose of the organization was to unite all the workers, skilled and unskilled, to meet the united front of the employers, and to elevate the lowest paid workers to the standard of the highest. Gompers and Strasser then inaugurated a successful campaign to secure the legalization of their action by the International and finally to have the same rule applied throughout the organization.[7] Gompers remained firm in the belief that the cigarmakers' union, if it were to be an effective force for the protection of the workers, must permit all branches of the industry—cigarmakers, rollers, filler-breakers, packers, and strippers—to be eligible for membership, whether they worked by hand, mold, or machine.[8]

As president of the A.F. of L., Gompers could not contend for industrialism in the affiliated unions in the same way that he did in his own union, as their form of organization was an internal matter over which he had no control. But he could and did urge a

closer working relationship or amalgamation between existing organizations as a step in the direction of industrialism. In 1888 he recommended to the Federation an early reorganization on the basis of industrial divisions and subdivisions. For example, the steel or metal industry might have a convention of the representatives of all the trade unions in that industry, the building trades in their industry, and the railroad employees in theirs, each legislating on the subjects that affected the general interests of their particular trades and industries. These industrial divisions in turn would be presented in the conventions of the A.F. of L. and on the Executive Council. The A.F. of L. would thus become a federation of industrial federations rather than a federation of trade unions.[9] But Gompers' proposal met with such disfavor among the affilliated unions that he had to admit that he was premature and shelve the plan.

In fact, he went to the opposite extreme and became the bulwark of defense for craft unionism, or trade autonomy as he preferred to call it. Two students of the labor movement have noted the significance of Gompers' reversal. One has pointed out that Gompers was more intelligent and less conservative than most of the trade union leaders, but

> he was enough like them and he wanted his office badly enough to connive with them in practices that hindered the growth of the union movement. Instead of opposing them for the greater good of millions of workers, be became their spokesman, their jolly and aggressive "chief." Instead of broadening and strengthening organized labor to its fullest capacities, he built up a political machine with henchmen of inferior ability but tested for their fellowship and fealty—a machine which was interested primarily in perpetuating itself.[10]

This capitulation, made early in the history of the A.F. of L., was crucial in the development of Gompers' career, for in making it he allied himself with the forces and principles that demanded further retreats on other key issues. Lewis Lorwin has called attention to the broader implications involved in this surrender, commenting that the policy of following the line of least resistance, bending to the will of the strong international unions, and assuring trade autonomy were the essence of Gompers' "leadership" in the Federation.[11]

But Lorwin does not particularize the application of this policy, referring specifically only to Gompers' advocacy of a centralized strike fund as another instance of his compromising with the principle of autonomy. Gompers sought to have the Federation establish a strike fund, and strike assistance necessarily carried with it the right to approve or disapprove strikes and to require some unions to pay for the support of others. The second convention of the A.F. of L. in 1887 proposed that the Federation should support any strike of its affiliated unions when requested, providing they had conformed with the strike laws of their own organizations, and that the Executive Council should levy on each union a weekly assessment of not more than five cents per member, to remain in force until the strike was won or called off. Gompers urged the adoption of this proposition, but it was defeated by a referendum vote.[12] Gompers commented bitterly at the next convention: "It is evident that either the principle of identity of interests of the toiling masses of our country [has] not been sufficiently recognized, or the unions are acting upon the belief that each should help itself before attempting to aid others." He urged that some plan of strike assistance be adopted. The Federation responded to his ap-

peal and authorized the Executive Council to levy a two cent assessment, to be held as an assistance fund and disbursed for the aid of strikes which it approved. It could also levy, when necessary, a weekly assessment of two cents for not more than five continuous weeks.[13]

Gompers was not satisfied with this measure, and he subsequently proposed that a sinking fund of five to six hundred thousand dollars be created by as many twenty-five cent assessments as might be necessary to establish and maintain the fund at that level. This fund would be used to pay strike benefits of four dollars a week to all strikers in any contest approved by the Executive Council.[14] This proposal was rejected, and in 1896 another proposal for the establishment of a defense fund was defeated. Two years later the assessment plan was repealed and the Executive Council was forbidden even to make loans or donations to affiliated unions.[15]

In place of the assessment system, provision was made for the establishment of a defense fund, in which any affiliated organization might participate by paying a per capita tax of five cents per month on each member. The Executive Council, on approving a strike by any participating organization, was to pay benefits of three dollars a week to each striker, up to ten weeks in a year.[16] Gompers did not believe that a discretionary plan of this kind was practicable, and his doubts were confirmed by the failure of the organizations to take advantage of it. He reiterated the recommendation that it be made obligatory upon every union, for unless a large number of them complied with it, it would be useless. The Federation, however, was unwilling to do more than restore the authority of the Council to assess the members one cent per week for ten weeks to render assistance to strikes in extraordinary cases.[17]

In 1901, Gompers returned to the subject in his annual report. He recommended that a larger assessment be authorized, and that the Executive Council be empowered to levy a portion of the assessment early in the year so that a fund would be at its disposal at any time, rather than waiting until a strike began. But again the A.F. of L. rejected his suggestion, stating that each union must rely on its own efforts and its own funds, and that they should refrain from striking if they could not carry it through without assistance from the Federation or its affiliates.[18] Gompers accepted this as the final verdict of the Federation, and discontinued his efforts to secure a defense fund or any other measure of strike control over the affiliated organizations.

If Gompers could have had the kind of Federation he wanted, it would have continued its policy of directing the struggle for the eight-hour day as a co-ordinated, centralized movement, employing as its chief method the general strike of all trades. In a recent article on the eight-hour movement from 1888 to 1891, it is indicated that Gompers' influence was thrown on the side of moderation because he did not insist on the enforcement of the Federation's decision to call a general strike on May 1, 1890. He suggested instead that one trade at a time be selected to inaugurate the eight-hour day, with the assistance of the entire labor movement.[19] But that was not Gompers' fault. Most of the international unions, including some of the biggest and most decisive, were not prepared to enforce the demand at

that time, and the Federation could not force them to go on strike, resolution or no resolution. All Gompers could do was to urge them to make the effort, and this he did energetically, as his correspondence for the year following the 1888 convention demonstrates. He did everything he could to stimulate the campaign of agitation and education, prodded the unions into action, organized mass meetings, issued circulars and pamphlets, and earnestly sought the cooperation of the Knights of Labor. It was only when a concerted movement appeared impossible that Gompers suggested the strategy of making a fight in one trade at a time. This was not Gompers' wish. It was the decision of the affiliated organizations, which the Federation was perforce obliged to ratify.

It is also stated, in the article previously mentioned, that in the 1890's the Federation decided to revive the centralized direction of the eight-hour movement, but that Gompers and the Executive Council did not implement the decision. This seems to be a misinterpretation of the evidence. After the fiasco of the scheduled miners' strike in 1891, the Federation refused to endorse any union's effort to enforce the eight-hour day. For the next few years the A.F. of L. left the matter to the discretion of the Executive Council, and the latter decided that the time was not opportune to begin another struggle. But in 1895, in spite of the depression which threw the labor movement on the defensive, Gompers proposed to revive the machinery that had been set up in 1888 and to select another union to contest for the eight-hour day on May 1, 1896.[20] The convention agreed, but the Council did not go through with the plan because the two organizations that struck during the following year did not need the financial assistance of the Federation. At the next convention, Gompers recommended an extensive plan of organization and agitation in preparation for a general strike on May 1, 1898.[21]

But once again the Federation receded from its ambitious program for a universal eight-hour movement, instructing the Executive Council to select one or more unions which were prepared to make a struggle in 1898. The International Association of Machinists was chosen, but when that organization referred the matter to a vote of its membership, the proposition was defeated. The Federation was forced to the conclusion that organized labor was unanimous in its theoretical belief in shorter hours, but in practice "Selfishness and the fear of recurring depressions, with their suffering and poverty, combine to make men eager to work to the limit of endurance when opportunity affords."[22] This was the end of the Federation's effort to direct the shorter-hours movement of American labor, except by its general agitation of the subject and occasional assistance to organizations which went on strike to enforce the demand. When Gompers in 1907 again urged that the Federation concentrate its efforts to secure the general introduction of the eight-hour day, his suggestion was repudiated, and he never raised the question again.[23]

A final illustration of Gompers' conflict and conciliation with other union leaders appears in the problem of the organization of the unskilled workers, and particularly of Negroes. Gompers shared with other trade union officials a cautious and uneasy feeling that a rapid growth in union membership would be unhealthy for the labor movement.[24] He realized too that it

would probably be unhealthy for him, because it was the large industrial unions containing masses of unskilled workers that formed the core of the opposition to "Gompersism" in the A.F. of L. The rapid organization of these workers would shift the balance and alter the character of the Federation and thus jeopardize the position of those who had a vested interest in maintaining its traditional composition. But Gompers was at least more far-sighted in this respect than most of the officers of the craft unions, and he made occasional efforts to overcome their aristocratic exclusiveness. This attitude, he said, had no place in the trade union movement, which should be based on the principle of the solidarity and identity of interests of the wage earners.[25] In 1899 the secretary of the tin plate workers' union told Gompers that his union did not want the unskilled workers, who should be allowed to organize as local unions directly affiliated with the A.F. of L. or remain unorganized. Gompers warned him of the danger in following such a course. He pointed out that it would create a division in the ranks and that the unorganized workers, feeling a natural resentment at being neglected, could be utilized as strike-breakers by the employers. The effort of organized labor, he stated, was not simply to protect skilled labor. "The effort of organized labor is to protect and advance the interests of every wage earner, and to secure justice for all; and experience has demonstrated that these can be best attained by a broad and comprehensive organization of workers of all branches, in any given industry, under one jurisdiction. . . ."[26] But his advice was not heeded, and under the Federation rule of craft autonomy, which Gompers made the heart of his credo, he could do nothing more than advise the international unions.

Gompers also urged local unions to abandon the policy of limiting membership in order to control the labor market. If a worker were excluded from membership in the union, he stated, it did not prevent him from seeking and getting employment. It only prevented him from seeking as a union member under union conditions. As a result he was simply used to tear down standards, when his cooperation should be secured to build them up. Besides, these workers, without any obligations to their fellow workers, could be used by the employers in case of strikes to endanger the very existence of the unions. He also urged the unions to keep their initiation fees low, to organize all the workers of the trade, and if there was not enough work for all, they should secure a reduction in the hours of labor and divide the work among all the men of the craft.[27] In this respect also, Gompers' advice was of little avail.

The Federation's most ambitious effort to break into the trusts was the steel organizing campaign of 1909 and 1910. In June, 1909, the United States Steel Corporation announced that all its plants would henceforth be operated as open shops, and the steel workers' and tin plate workers' unions called a strike to maintain what was left of unionism in the steel industry.[28] At the Federation convention in November, it was decided to call a conference of the officers of all affiliated national and international unions to meet in Pittsburgh and decide on a plan of action. Nearly fifty of the eighty-seven internationals were represented at the conference on December 13. They decided that all the national unions should be asked to furnish at least one organizer each to

the steel workers' union, that the A.F. of L. place as many of its organizers as possible in the field, and that in every city where steel mills were located the central labor unions should appoint special organizing committees. They also planned to issue a call for financial assistance to the strikers, a series of educational circulars, and a statement of grievances against the steel trust to the President of the United States and the governors of the states in which the corporation operated. They further urged the steel and tin plate workers to amalgamate into one union.[29]

But after one month only five international unions besides the steel and tin plate workers had complied with their promise to send organizers, and Gompers had to send another appeal to them to fulfill their obligations.[30] This appeal brought little more response, and about three weeks later President P. J. McArdle of the steel workers wrote Gompers that he was going to discontinue the campaign to organize U. S. Steel. Gompers immediately called him on the phone to dissuade him from that course, but learned that he had already dispersed the ten or eleven organizers that had been placed at his disposal by the Federation and some of the internationals. Gompers was quite disgusted with this action. Although the small number of organizers available was not sufficient to cover all the plants of the corporation, he felt that some effective work could have been performed at concentrated spots and the workers' interest aroused.

"Any moment might have developed into the psychological time when the interests, the intelligence, the hearts and the conscience of the workers of the corporation themselves might have been reached, and an organization which has dwindled could have been revivified, as was the fact with the almost totally unorganized condition even of the Shirt Waist Makers of New York and Philadelphia. I can't escape the conviction that an opportunity which might have proven of the most intense interest and advantage to the cause has been thrown away. . . ."[31]

Actually the steel union was really not interested in organizing the industry. After the defeat of the union in 1901, an effort was made to cultivate what President Michael Tighe called a "business relationship" with the Steel Corporation. That meant, he explained, "giving way to every request that was made by the subsidiary companies when they insisted upon it," and agreeing not to extend the organization of the industry. This policy was based on a fear of the strength of the corporation and a decision to try to buy security for the skilled workers at the expense of the unskilled and unorganized workers.[32] Gompers had already compromised with this policy, especially by his defense of the trusts and his activities in the National Civic Federation, and in 1905 had publicly stated that the masses of unskilled workers were probably unorganizable, blaming it on their lack of intelligence.[33] After 1910 he fell in line completely with the stand-pat policy of the labor bureaucracy, as he demonstrated by his conduct in the garment, packing, and steel organizing campaigns of the next decade.

Gompers' attitude toward the organization of the Negro workers reveals another striking transformation. Until the middle 1890's, Gompers strongly believed that the Negro workers should be organized. As he explained to his Southern organizer, the unionization of colored workers was an absolute necessity, for if they were not organized and given an equal opportunity to protect their interests and uplift themselves, they would in-

evitably sink lower in the economic scale and pull the white workers down to their level. Furthermore, they would be utilized by the employers to break strikes and destroy unions, and they would be justified in such action if the unions made it impossible for them to enter industry in any other way.[34] Gompers further believed that they should belong to the same unions as the white workers, and while he did not attempt to force integration on the local or international unions, he did accept the obligation of trying to persuade them to take the far-sighted course and eliminate the color line.[35] For example, when he heard that a local teamsters' union was discriminating against Negroes, he informed it that "the American Federation of Labor positively places its stamp of disapproval upon such attempt," and advised it to accept Negroes and accord them every benefit that membership entitled them to.[36]

Gompers refused to grant a charter to the International Association of Machinists for five years, insisting that it must first eliminate its constitutional exclusion of Negroes. That policy, he argued, was an element of weakness which doomed the union to failure unless it was abolished and the identity of interests of the workers was recognized. Both as a matter of principle and of practical common sense, the workers must not divide their forces and give the employers the means to keep down both groups. And if the trade unions made enemies of the Negroes, he asserted, they must expect them to be antagonistic to the unions.[37] Finally, when local unions refused to accept Negroes, Gompers urged that the Negroes should be organized anyhow and harmonious arrangements made between the Negro and white workers as a step toward eventual integration. He wrote to a local union that the unionization of both white and Negro workers was the best way to overcome prejudice, and added:

> Inasmuch, however, as that prejudice still exists, and that many white workmen will not belong to the same local organization with black men, . . . it might be more advantageous to go to work gradually to accomplish the desired end. In other words, have the Union of white men organize, and have the Union of colored men organize also, both unions to work in unison and harmony to accomplish the desired end.
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> It is useless to be constantly trying to ram our heads through stone walls; recognizing conditions which exist is the best way we can secure the organization of all in a way which must ultimately bring about a unity of feeling and action among all toilers. . . .[38]

By 1896, however, Gompers was beginning to recede from these views. One reason was that he wanted to secure the affiliation of the railroad brotherhoods, and hoped that the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen would make the first break. But it was adamant against eliminating the color line from its constitution, and Gompers was, as ever, quite prepared to sacrifice principle to the "practical" and immediate objective of gaining accessions for the Federation and making it "work" smoothly and without friction. He made it plain to the Brotherhood that it did not have to abolish discrimination to be admitted to the A.F. of L.; it only had to change the wording of its constitution so that it would not "go forth emblazoned upon our banners our antagonism to a race." But the president of the Brotherhood said that his men did not desire to be hypocrites, and they refused to make the change.[39] After this experience, Gompers abandoned the attempt to make equality of admission, even on paper, a qualification for affiliation. When the Order of Railroad Telegraphers and the Brotherhood of Railway Trackmen, both of which restricted membership to whites, joined the A.F. of L. in 1899,

Gompers made no protest, but hailed their action as a harbinger of unity in the labor movement.[40] Three years later, a national union already affiliated with the Federation—the stationary engineers—amended its laws so as to exclude Negroes, and neither Gompers nor the A.F. of L. registered any opposition.[41] In 1900, he recommended, and the Federation approved, that separate local unions and central labor bodies be organized whenever the Executive Council deemed it advisable.[42] In any case, Gompers' opposition to industrial unionism and the organization of the unskilled made it practically impossible for him to effectively organize the Negro workers.

Gompers and the Federation settled into a fixed policy of jim-crowism. In 1901, in response to the demand of the Trades Council of Anniston, Alabama, the Federation decided that even where there were not enough Negro locals to form a separate trades council, the Central Labor Union did not have to admit their delegates.[43] Gompers no longer viewed the formation of separate locals and central labor unions as a necessary alternative to the preferred policy of united organization. He accepted it as the final and best settlement of the problem. He abandoned the earlier requirement that the Negro as well as the white workers should desire separate organizations before their formation would be permitted; he did not urge the white workers to accept the Negro workers before yielding to the establishment of separate unions; he even specifically refused to make such a request of a central labor union, deciding in advance that it was best for both the Negro and white workers that they be segregated to avoid "arousing bitterness."[44] And he reversed his decision to appoint a colored organizer for the South when it was protested by the Alabama Federation of Labor.[45] Finally, he refused to grant charters as federal locals to Negro unions when any international union, affiliated with the A.F. of L. or not, would neither accept them itself nor surrender jurisdiction over them. In other words, he accepted the policy of those organizations in refusing to allow the organization of Negro workers under any condition.[46] He accepted as permanent the division of the American working force into skilled white and unskilled Negro workers.[47]

Another indication of Gompers' shifting attitude is revealed by the fact that, while he had formerly maintained that the lack of organization among Negro workers and their employment as strikebreakers were caused by the prejudice of white workers who refused to make common cause with them, he was now blaming the Negroes themselves. He wrote in 1896 that men who had so little self-respect or appreciation of their interests as to help the employers against their fellow workers were the enemies of progress.[48] He published an article in the *American Federationist* by the A.F. of L. organizer in Georgia, which asserted that no effort of the Federation to organize the Southern Negroes could be successful because they did not possess "those peculiarities of temperament such as patriotism, sympathy, sacrifice, etc., which are peculiar to most of the Caucasian race. . . ." Gompers agreed that this was a fair presentation of the subject.[49] In 1899, in order to demonstrate that they were not neglecting the organization of the Negroes, the Executive Council launched a Southern "organizing campaign," consisting of three organizers for one to three months. A year later Gompers wrote his New Orleans organizer that "while it is

desirable to organize them, . . . yet the organization of white workmen is of paramount importance, and should not be hazarded.''[50]

On these five fundamental questions, Gompers started his career with a policy that was in advance of the majority of trade union leaders, and in each case—sometimes quickly and sometimes gradually after putting up a fight—he compromised his principles and finally yielded them completely. It should be noted, however, that on other issues he was behind the sentiment of the rank and file, even in his earlier days. This was especially true of his opposition to labor's independent political activity. These inconsistencies made it easier for him to retreat from those positions on which he had taken a more advanced stand.

Gompers was readily able to compromise his principles because he was such a complete opportunist. Unguided by any theoretical understanding of the long range objectives of the labor movement, he moved from day to day for immediate, ''practical'' gains regardless of ultimate consequences. He was constitutionally allergic to speculative thought, and when he was faced with theoretical questions his first impulse was to shy away from them.[51] He eschewed ''flights of imagination'' which appealed to ''the passionate, the nervous, or the sentimental.'' The trade unions, he said, ''are the business organizations of the wage-earners to attend to the business of the wage-earners; and while the earnest, honest, thinking trade-unionist must necessarily be sentimental, theoretical, self-sacrificing, and brave, these if needs be must sink for a time in order that the best interests of the wage-earners may be advanced, even if but to gain a milestone on the thorny road of emancipation.''[52] So it was easy for him to abandon a principle if it meant the affiliation of another union, a gain in wages for a select group of workers, or some other immediate advantage. And it was easy to justify such action on pragmatic grounds, or as he put it, to accept something as ''theoretically bad but practically necessary.''[53]

Then again, as the A.F. of L. became institutionalized, Gompers came to have a vested interest in his job, a position which he clung to the more desperately after his temporary defeat in 1894. And he held it by sitting on his hands, by condoning craft jealousies and local prejudices, by building a machine which he could depend on to keep him in office, and by defending a policy of narrow exclusiveness in order to keep the support of the trade union bureaucrats. As he told the United States Industrial Commission, if he failed to express the consensus of opinion of the affiliated unions, he would soon be a general without an army.[54] It may be true that Gompers would have been dethroned if he had persisted aggressively in fighting for these principles. But it is tempting to speculate, in view of the radicalism of the workers in the middle of the last decade of the nineteenth century and the ability of the industrial unions in combination with the socialists to elect McBride of the miners to the presidency of the Federation in 1894, whether Gompers might not have placed himself at the head of this faction and carried it to a permanent victory which would have completely altered the character of the Federation and the subsequent history of the labor movement. Instead, he chose to fight the very elements that energetically supported the principles he once believed in, and joined those who made him abandon those principles.

But, as Gompers was fond of say-

ing, one must deal with men as they are and not as some would like them to be. The transformation of Gompers from a militant and radical agitator to a conservative labor bureaucrat was symptomatic of a general trend among the skilled workers in the 1890's and early 1900's. While the masses were becoming more radical under the impact of the growing power of the trusts and their subversion of governments to their tools, while they were moving toward industrial unionism and independent political action and Populism, the conservative leaders of the craft unions were, like the steel union, yielding to the monopolies, entering into a period of trade agreements and protocols, joining the National Civic Federation, avoiding clashes with the trusts and the government, buying a limited security and higher wages for their members at the expense of the unskilled workers and the consumers. They made the A.F. of L. the representative of the aristocracy of labor, and Gompers agreed to be their spokesman and defender.

References

[1] This article is a slight modification of a paper read before the American Historical Association in New York City, December 30, 1954.

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[16] AFL, *18th Convention,* 1898, 45.

[17] AFL, *19th Convention,* 1899, 10, 136.

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[21] AFL, *16th Convention,* 1896, 23, 68.

[22] AFL, *17th Convention,* 1897, 85-86; *18th Convention,* 1898, 21, 122.

[23] AFL, *27th Convention,* 1907, 30-31.

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[25] Gompers to John G. Riedel, December 7, 1891.

[26] Gompers to T. Berry, March 12, 1899; also Gompers to E. E. Greenawalt, April 11, 1902.

[27] Gompers to Michael Frey, March 16, 1900; Gompers to Thomas M. Gafney, January 4, 1901; Gompers to Henry E. Foelske, March 1, 1901.

[28] Commons, *History of Labour in the United States,* IV, 138.

[29] Gompers, "Labor and the Steel Trust," *American Federationist* (Washington), XVII (January, 1910), 35-37.

[30] Gompers to the International Unions, January 18, 1910.

[31] Gompers to George W. Perkins, February 25, 1910.

[32] Michael F. Tighe, testimony before Committee on Education and Labor, U.S. Senate, 66 Cong., 1 Sess. (1919), *Investigation of Strike in Steel Industries* (Senate Report 289, Series Set 7591), 341 ff.

[33] Gompers, interview in Washington, D.C., *Star,* February 7, 1905.

[34] Gompers to Jerome Jones, March 8, 1893.

[35] Gompers to H. M. Ives, November 10, 1892.

[36] Gompers to W. H. Luchtenburg, May 9, 1892.

[37] Gompers to Frank D. Hamlin, April 30, 1890; Gompers to Charles W. Murphy, May 16, 1890; Gompers to Fred J. Carr, December 8, 1891.

[38] Gompers to Louis F. Klinger, July 18, 1891; Gompers to Ed. J. Donegan, December 9, 1892; Gompers to David Watkins, July 17, 1893.

[39] Gompers to William S. Carter, in *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine* (Cincinnati), July, 1896, 65; Gompers to W. D. Lewis, April 9, 1897; William S. Carter to Frank Morrison, May 12, 1897, in AFL's incoming correspondence, Box 78.

[40] Gompers, "Unity Drawing Nearer," *American Federationist,* VII (February, 1900), 34-35.

[41] William E. B. Du Bois (ed.), *The Negro*

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[42] AFL, *20th Convention,* 1900, 22-23, 112-129.

[43] New York *Tribune,* December 13, 1901.

[44] Gompers to H. A. Stemburgh, July 20, 1903; Gompers to L. E. Turley, September 20, 1905; Gompers to Frank Duffy, March 2, 1906.

[45] Gompers to David Williams, February 16, 1903.

[46] Minutes, Executive Council, September 21, 1903, in *American Federationist,* X (November, 1903), 1191; Gompers to Calmeze E. Henike, March 19, 1902; Gompers to J. H. Patterson, March 14, 1903 and March 23, 1903; Gompers to L. B. Allen, March 30, 1903 and May 8, 1903; Gompers to James McNair, November 6, 1905; Minutes, Executive Council, October 16-21, 1911, in *American Federationist,* XVIII (December, 1911), 1011.

[47] Gompers, statement in Toledo *News-Bee,* October 27, 1905.

[48] Gompers to W. H. Stokes, August 27, 1896.

[49] Will Winn, "The Negro: His Relation to Southern Industry," *American Federationist,* IV (February, 1898), 269-271; Gompers to Will Winn, January 19, 1898.

[50] Gompers to Will Winn, March 9, 1899; Gompers to James Leonard, June 28, 1900.

[51] *Report of the Committee of the Senate upon the Relations Between Labor and Capital* (Washington, 1885; 47 Cong. 2 Sess.; Doc. No. 54. Ed 83: L11, vols. I-IV), I, 289; United States Strike Commission on the Chicago Strike of June-July, 1894, *Report* (Washington, 1894), 200.

[52] Gompers, Report to AFL, *16th Convention,* 1896, 19.

[53] Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor,* II, 153.

[54] United States Industrial Commission on the relations and conditions of Capital and Labor, *Report* (Washington, 1901-1902), VII, 596-597; see also Gompers' report to the Cigarmakers International Union on the Labor Congress of 1881, in *Cigar Makers Official Journal,* VII (December, 1881), 5.